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The Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada's "Study of the Practice of Ministry"—LWF plus *BEM*?

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The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada is to be commended for making available, on schedule, "A Study of the Practice of Ministry" for review by congregations and individuals during 1990 and, it is planned, adoption at its 1991 convention. Constitutional and By-law changes and "standards of acceptance and continuance for each order of Ministry" are to be adopted at its 1993 convention. The 25-page Study, containing 46 propositional "Statements", each with a "Background" rationale, is the work, begun in 1986, of a Task Force of 7 members (all clergy plus one deaconess) and one staff person, to which a lay panel of 4 persons was added in 1987. The study format asks groups to check whether they "like", "would omit", or "add" to each statement or "rewrite" it. The Response Form asks groups to say why they appreciate, find unclear, would reconsider or add certain points. This workmanlike approach can be examined with gratitude and profit by persons beyond the congregations of the ELCIC.

No immediate crisis seems to have precipitated this 5 to 7-year study, beyond a "continuing attempt to review" structures and procedures after the merger in 1985, dialogue with other churches, and the "desire to find more effective ways of equipping the 'saints' for their Ministry." The specific mandate is to make recommendations "regarding forms of professional service (i.e. ordained, diaconate, lay professional)" based on "sound Lutheran doctrine, biblical reference, early church practices, the history of the Lutheran church and ecumenical dialogue." The brief bibliography points one to Faith and Order's *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (*BEM* 1982); two "LWF [Lutheran World Federation] Studies" in 1983,

The Lutheran Understanding of Ministry and *Lutheran Understanding of Episcopal Office*; one volume from U.S. "Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue", IV. *Eucharist and Ministry* (1970), and one from the international Roman Catholic/Lutheran Joint Commission, *The Ministry in the Church* (1982).¹

To some degree, the Canadian study is thus distinguished from the mandate to the 1988–93 Study of Ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America by the fact that the merging churches in the U.S. could not agree on the status of rostered persons other than "those who serve in the office of Word and Sacrament." This meant in particular the Commissioned (Day School) Teachers and Deaconesses and Deacons regarded as ordained by the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches. Further, by specific mandate, the 17 U.S. task force members (with 1 staff person) were to give attention to "the possibility of articulating a Lutheran understanding and adaptation of the threefold ministerial office of bishop, pastor, and deacon and its ecumenical implication."²

Lutherans north and south of the Canada/U.S. border shared observers during their merger processes in the 1980s and probably influenced each others at points theologically and organizationally.³ While there is no reason that ministry should have to be structured the same way in both countries (for situations and needs can vary), as much compatibility as possible would be beneficial among North American Lutherans. The ELCIC "Study of the Practice of Ministry" has been distributed to all members of the U.S. Task Force, though it has not yet been formally discussed. It has been commended by some speakers.⁴ The comments which follow are personal observations, in a collegial spirit by one U.S. reader; they do not represent an ELCA Task Force position, for at the time of writing (October, 1990) none has been formulated as yet on these matters.

The Structure of the ELCIC Study

It is helpful to note the progression of the argument in "A Study of the Practice of Ministry". It moves from (1) The Ministry of the Whole People of God to (2) The Ministries of the Whole People of God, and then to (3) The Office of the Ordained Ministry: A Ministry of the Whole People of God.

(Insertion of the Greek word *laos* after each heading serves to remind one of “laity”, as in 3.4 Background [hereafter “B”].) This structure comes from the 1983 LWF *Understanding of Ministry*, pp. 6–10. The second half of the ELCIC Study then takes up (4) Pastor (*Presbyter*), (5) Bishop (*Episcopos*), and (6) Deacon (*Diakonos*), with seven remarkably parallel statements under each heading (plus 2 additional statements about bishops). This arrangement may owe more to *BEM*’s third section on Ministry, 3 nos. 19–31 (in the sequence there “Bishops, Presbyters, and Deacons”) than to the LWF document, which only under “The Ordained Ministry” (nos. 18–32) takes up “Its Episcopal Expression” (nos. 28–32), without reference to deacons (except on p. 17), before going on to “Women in the Ministries of the Church”. (Women are specifically mentioned in the ELCIC Study only at 6.1B, “Both women and men were called into the diaconal office” in New Testament times, but masculine pronouns are generally avoided by use of plurals or “person”.)

(1)–(3). The Whole People of God

Running through the Canadian statement is an emphasis on “the (one) ministry of Christ” (1.3,8; 4.3; 5.3; 6.3) and then “the one ministry of all the people of God” (2.1,5), of which “the ordained ministry of Word and Sacraments is one expression of the ministry to which all Christians are called” (3.2B). Such a way of speaking owes a great deal to the LWF *Understanding of Ministry*, which says, in a perhaps more nuanced way, “The ministry of God’s people is so closely linked with the redemption and reconciliation effected by Christ’s own ministry that through it Christ himself continues to work” (no. 4); “The ministry of the people of God is actually one ministry, and its wholeness must be emphasized” (no. 12); the ordained ministry is placed “within the one ministry of the Church” (no. 18).

There is thus a massive unity in the ELCIC Study through such references to “one ministry”, which becomes “explicit in... specific ministries” (2.1). But this pattern may be deceptive. Is Christ’s ministry “one”, or is it twofold (law/gospel, salvation and judgment), or a threefold office (prophet, priest, king)? “One ministry” is not one of the 7 unities in Ephesians 4:4–6.

Is “one ministry of Christ” a theological affirmation or tautological rhetoric about “the one Christ” (1 Corinthians 8:6; CA Preface 5)? Further, what is the “one ministry” of the people of God? The study strongly suggests that it is proclaiming what God has done in Christ (1.2,3,4,9), but it also includes suffering (1.9) and once, under “witness”, encompasses also ecology and justice concerns (1.7B). What is masked here by the “one ministry” emphasis for Christ and the people is the seeming absence of the more common Lutheran emphasis on “one office” of ordained ministry.⁵ For by shifting the oneness to Christ and the whole people of God, the way is eased for allowing three ordained offices or orders (see below).

Moreover, the sequence of Christ, people of God, and ordained ministry may, for some students of the Confessions and ecumenism, place the ministry of Word and Sacraments too squarely under this “one ministry of all the people of God” (2.1) as but “one expression of the ministry to which all Christians are called” (3.2). One must tread warily here, given all the inner-Lutheran debate over the origins of the “ordained ministry of Word and Sacraments”. The Canadian statement makes several important points. This office of the ordained is, on the one hand, “functional” (3.2B); between laity and clergy “there is no distinction of status”, but “only a distinction of function” (3.4B). It “is filled only by the call of the Church and the authorization of the whole assembly of unbelievers” (3.3B). Yet, on the other hand, an *Uebertragungslehre* or theory of “transference” of authority from the local congregation to the pastor is repudiated, seemingly, when 3.4B says, “The Church does not delegate or transfer its ministry of preaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments to one of its members, but fills the office of Word and Sacraments by calling persons into this office which God instituted and entrusted to the Church.” Therefore, “the ordained ministry... stands over against the community” (3.3B; cf. LWF *Understanding of Ministry* no. 21, where, however, the authority of the ordained is qualified by the phrase, “but only insofar as their proclamation is faithful to the Gospel”).

What is striking in the ELCIC position is how ordination is located under the whole people of God. It nonetheless avoids saying in 1.1 (“Baptism makes all of God’s people ministers”) that “baptism is ordination”. Rather, “the people of God call

and ordain qualified candidates to fill the office" (3.4), which "functions within the apostolic tradition of the whole people of God" (3.5). Hence the statement in 3.6,

Ordination is the action of God through the Church to set apart qualified people to publicly proclaim the Gospel through the ministry of Word and Sacraments. This action includes the laying on of hands by those in pastoral leadership, and invocation of the Holy Spirit, in the context of public worship.

The most curious shift comes, however, in the final paragraph of the Background section for 3.6. It really introduces a further argument:

Normally it is the bishop who lays hands on the ordinand as a sign of the apostolic succession of the ministry and of the Church, its unity and continuity. This sign of apostolic succession is never separated from the substance of the apostolic tradition of faithful witness and service to the Gospel which it signifies. The laying on of hands by the bishop does not devalue or invalidate the pastoral ministry which exists without such laying on of hands. The substance of the apostolic tradition of faithful witness to the Gospel stands above and before the sign of ordination by the bishop (Apology, XIII, 7-13; Treatise, 65-72; Smalcald, X; Solid Decl. X,19).

Later, in 5.1B, it will be said, "Bishops serve the Church by... ordaining other ministers and serving as their pastor." In 5.2B it is granted that during the Reformation "the ordination of ministers by non-episcopal ministers or even congregations in this emergency situation was sanctioned" by Smalcald Articles III,x; Treatise 60-72, but this is then called a "departure from the historical continuity of apostolic tradition" which "led Lutherans to see the historic succession of bishops as non-essential." For "the office of bishop exists by divine command", citing CA 28.21, though there and in 5.2B the list of functions does not expressly mention ordaining, unless it be assumed under "exercising responsibility for an orderly transmission of ministerial authority in the Church" (5.2B; cf. 5.8, where it is "the bishop, in communion with the whole people of God", who "is responsible for the orderly transfer of ordained ministry within the Church").

It is not clear what we have here. Is it an *Uebertragungslehre* from Church (not congregation) to bishop (not minister-presbyters and bishops), a transference of "responsibility of the whole people of God" (3.3) to the bishop? This remains unclear (at least to me), even when the important

paragraphs in 5.8B are studied and the confessional and other references are examined. The argument mounted in the U.S. Lutheran-Catholic dialogue for "presbyterial succession", that Lutheran pastors ordain Lutheran pastors (Vol. 4 [1970], pp. 14-15, cf. 116-17) is certainly bypassed. The list of how bishops serve the church in 5.1B, which draws on the LWF Study on *Episcopal Office* (no. 17), omits part of the phrasing there (italicized here): "ordaining pastors *or by authorizing others to ordain....*" The final paragraph quoted above from 3.6B seems not to come from LWF's *Lutheran Understanding of Ministry* (cf. no. 47) or even from *BEM* (cf. 3: no. 29, Bishops, "*in communion with the presbyters and deacons and the whole community, are responsible for the orderly transfer of ministerial authority in the Church,*" italics added; and no. 39 Commentary). Whence?

Thus to locate ordination within the whole people of God (3.3,4,5) but *de facto* to assign the laying on of hands to the bishop alone (3.6B, though the statement in 3.6 says "those in pastoral leadership," cf. 5.1B) may at first glance reassure both those who wish to stress a pastoral office derived from the church community *and* those who prefer ordination by bishops in "the historic succession". But has the idea of "historic succession of bishops" (5.2B) been inserted without really defining the terms, arguing the case, or stating how Lutherans are to attain this? Upon fuller examination, it must be said, the Study will scarcely satisfy Roman Catholic or Anglican views on bishops and orders. Or is it meant as a Lutheran way of relating episcopacy and people of God?

Space permits discussing but one other item in the often excellent sections on laity in parts 1-3. The ELCIC Study consistently speaks of the "ministry/ministries" of the whole people of God, yet it brings in "calling" or "vocation" as the context where these persons "carry out the one ministry of Christ". This sidesteps the distinction proposed by some, whereby ministry is confined to what is done by clergy and laity as ministers of God's saving purpose, while vocation or calling is what clergy and laity do under creation and law.⁶ Perhaps this distinction is rightly avoided in the Canadian Study since in Hebrew, Greek, English, and other languages "ministry" is so widely used that we shall probably never be able to restrict it to service of the gospel and to redemption (quite apart from

the law/gospel understanding in the proposal). But the waters are muddied (on any understanding of the terms) when the Study in 1.9B says "Ministry is the fundamental vocation of the whole people of God, both those engaged in the Office of Word and Sacraments and those who are not." Different senses of "call" and "vocation" must be sorted out (cf. 1.8; 3.4; 4.1; 4.6B, etc.).

(4)–(6). Pastor, Bishop, Deacon

The content of these sections can be scrutinized by putting their 7 basic statements in parallel.

(4) The Pastor 1) called by and serves the church	(5) The Bishop called by and serves the church	(6) The Deacon called by the Church as [READ and] serves the church
in a local community	in a community of local com- munities	in a local or regional community
with primary responsibility for a local com- munity	with primary responsibility for a community of communities	with primary responsibility for a local or regional com- munity
proclaiming the Gospel for a local community	proclaiming the Gospel for a community of communities	proclaiming the Gospel for a local or reg- ional community
through Word and sacraments	through Word and sacraments	through a min- istry of service
2) serves in a ministry of proclaiming the Word of God, presiding..., and guiding...	serves in a ministry of supervision, continuity and unity	serves in a variety of ministry exemplifying the interdependence of worship and service in daily life

3) the ministry is subordinated to the one ministry of Jesus Christ	the ministry is subordinated to the one ministry of Jesus Christ	the ministry is subordinated to the one ministry of Jesus Christ
4) called to be an example of apostolic witness and lifestyle	called to be an example of apostolic faithfulness in witness and lifestyle	called to be an example of apostolic faithfulness and lifestyle
5) the ministry stands over against the community as well as within the community	the ministry stands over against the community as well as within the community	the ministry stands over against the community as well as within the community
6) serves in collegiality with other ordained ministers and the community of believers	serves in collegiality with ordained ministers and local communities	serves in collegiality with other ordained ministers and the community of believers
7) is a symbol of the unity of the church both in its local and universal manifestations.	is a symbol of the unity of the church in its regional and universal expressions	is a symbol of the unity of the church both in its local and universal manifestations
8)	is responsible for orderly transfer of ordained ministries	

within the church

- 9) oversees the
shepherding of local
communities and
ordained ministries

These statements can be read as providing such massive parallelism in points 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 that “one office” may be assumed, one ministerial office with three parts, distinguished only by function (no. 2) and locale of jurisdiction (no. 1). But the term “one office” is not used. Hence, what was said above about the consistent phrase in the statements, “one ministry” (of Christ or of all the people of God), must be recalled, as well as what was noted about the bishop as sole ordainer (cf. 5.1B), presumably in “the historic succession of bishops” (5.2B, though it is unclear how that succession is obtained—scarcely just by Lutherans declaring it). It further strikes one as odd, with regard to the description of *the bishop* that s/he provides “supervision, continuity and unity” (5.2, though according to point 7 all three offices are “symbol of the unity of the Church”) but that no mention is made of bishops preaching and themselves administering the sacraments. Cf. 5.2B, “The policy [polity?] of the [medieval?] Church is affirmed in the Lutheran Confessions, provided that the bishops upheld the right proclamation of the Gospel,” etc., citing CA 28 (“it is the office of the bishop to preach...,” etc.). *BEM* 3:29 may put it better: “Bishops preach the Word, preside at the sacraments, ...” etc. The bishop’s role could therefore be clarified by more overt reference to the “fundamental task” for bishops of ‘proclaiming the gospel and administering the sacraments,’ whence the “special duties of episcopal ministries derive” (LWF *Episcopal Office* no. 16); by more detail on “whence ordination”; and by greater realism and honesty about “historic succession”.

The depiction of *the pastor* raises, by use of that very term, the issue of those in chaplaincy, teaching, and administration. However, the Study handles it by appeal to “diversification of the pastoral office into specialized ministries” in accord with church by-laws (4.1B). One complaint may be that several

statements do not prove, upon examination, to be as significant as they first seem. That the pastoral and other offices are “subordinated to the one ministry of Jesus Christ” (4.3, etc.) may lead to the reply, “Of course”, and the assertion that the same can be said of the whole people of God (but isn’t, apparently, in sections 1–3). Similarly with being an example of apostolic witness and lifestyle (4.4, etc., for 3.5 could also include this). (The variations of wording in this fourth statement with regard to each office elude me, and the Background offered is so similar as not to help explain the differences in wording. Is “faithfulness”, e.g., something for bishops and deacons but not for pastors? Don’t deacons “witness”? The paragraph under 1.7B about ministry of witness might especially fit them.) As for statement 5, exactly the same words are used for pastor, bishop, and deacon: they stand “over against... as well as within the community.” This is, for the poor community, a rather heavy weighting toward “againstness”. Contrast 3.5, “*within* the apostolic tradition”; 3.3B, “*also* stands over against the community because [when?]... it proclaims the Gospel to God’s people,” and 3.2B can be read as muting somewhat this *gegeneuber* (“ordained ministry... is *one* expression of the ministry to which all Christians are called”). At times it sounds as if (1)–(3) were composed by a lay task force and (4)–(6) by a clerical one! Some consideration may also be in order as to whether one wishes to say that each clerical office not only “is exercised on behalf of Jesus Christ” but also “makes him present” (4.5B; 5.5B; 6.5B). If so, how? Is this eucharistic presence (via deacons)? Presence *in personam*, or what?

The *deacon* as we have seen, is spoken of in basically the same terms as pastor and bishop in five of the seven statements. What distinguishes these ministers, who in current parlance are sometimes spoken of as “lay professional” workers or “commissioned ministers”, is that their responsibility is not “Word and Sacraments” but “a ministry of service” (6.1 and the introductory remark to the section). The background to 6.2 suggests the range of services envisioned (administrators, counsellors, youth workers, church musicians), but then it is added that “professional status... plus sufficient theological education” would be required. It is unclear whether those thus “assisting the witness and service of the Christian community” would also assist in public worship, or whether some deacons

would “exercise their responsibility to Word and Sacrament” only by assisting in worship. Who would fit into this ordained ministry which is so similarly presented as that of pastor and bishop is unclear without by-laws and standards which are to come later.

It can be (and has been) said that the Canadian Study lends itself to *two* forms of ordination, Word and Service alongside Word and Sacraments, within a single public office of the ministry.⁷ But the structure and contents of the Study and its treatment of ordination may rather point to triple offices within “the one ministry of all the people of God” (where performance of ordinations has been transferred to the bishops). Is it then *threefold*, not *twofold* (because pastor and bishop have been separated)? Or is it really *unitary* (one ministry, of the Church, with Word and Sacraments just one expression of what all are called to, as 1.9B and 3.2B suggest)? But what then of deacons, who engage in service and worship, not sacraments?

Summing Up

This first public draft of the ELCIC Study has many excellencies, unsung above, such as its obvious appeal to all God’s people to minister. Overall, the following impressions emerge out of what has been said above.

- 1) Sections 1–3 draw heavily on LWF Studies on ministry and episcopacy; 4–6 rest more on *BEM*.
- 2) Positioning ordination within the responsibility of the people of God, yet in point of fact assigning it to the bishop (literally in his/her hands) as “sign of apostolic succession” and presumably reflection of “historic succession of bishops” is in need of clarification. Often the Background paragraphs seem to bring in not just support but new points beyond what was in a Statement. One should therefore take seriously the request to rewrite some Background sections.
- 3) Though the Task Force was mandated to study “forms of professional service (i.e. ordained, diaconate, lay professional) in the ELCIC”, it seems that more attention has been given to

laity and bishops than to that mandated aim, and it remains unclear (at least to me, at this reading) who will end up in the diaconate.

4) The question I, for one, have posed to the ELCA Task Force on the Study of Ministry (though we have given no answer to it as yet) must be reiterated here: what do we owe, in the process of such studies and decision-making, by way of consultation and liaison with other Lutheran Churches in North America as well as in Europe and elsewhere?

5) If some comments above have seemed critical, they are prompted by taking seriously the ELCIC response to *BEM* and are at points consonant with it.⁸ For the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada said of *BEM* that "in defining the threefold pattern of ordained ministry," Scripture as normative seems to be dismissed "in favour of" later practices; "the image of the pastor is not as clear as it could be"; "for the ELCC there is only one ordination and not three"; and apostolic "content" as well as apostolic "sign" must be considered.

Notes

- ¹ The Study's bibliography at the end also lists, among other titles, Carl E. Braaten, *The Apostolic Imperative* (1985), and Roy Harrisville, *Ministry in Crisis* (1987), which take contrasting positions on many points, plus J. Reumann, *Ministries Examined* (1987), a collection of mainly descriptive essays. Other pertinent LWF Studies, not specifically cited, include *The Ministry of All Baptized Believers* (1980) and *Women in the Ministries of the Church* (1983). The material in the bibliography from the bilateral dialogues comes only from Lutheran-Catholic discussions, an area out of which we are likely to get agreed, official results on the ministry in the near future. Omission of materials from Lutheran-Reformed/Presbyterian dialogues can be justified on the grounds that the doctrine and practice of the ministry has never been divisive between these groups (though the Reformed tradition does include various kinds of elders and deacons, not simply "one office" of ordained ministry). Lack of reference to Lutheran-Anglican material may be more serious, since predecessor bodies of the ELCIC (the ALC and LCA) have since 1982 had agreement on interim eucharistic hospitality, and LED III expects to present a statement on episcopacy in 1991. Particularly pertinent are the results of the Canadian Lutheran-Anglican Dialogue of 1983-86, published in *Consensus* 12/1-2 (1986), ed. by Eduard R. Riegert, and *The Niagara Report: Report of the Anglican-Lutheran*

Consultation on Episcopate, Niagara Falls, September 1987, published for the Anglican Consultative Council and the Lutheran Word Federation (London: Church Publishing House, 1988).

- ² The mandate is given in continuing resolution 10.11.A87 in the ELCA Constitution. For the history of CNLC discussions leading to the impasse and the ELCA study now in process, see *Ministries Examined*, 199–221.
- ³ Cf., e.g., J. Reumann, “The New Testament Concept of the Word: Forms of the Word,” *Consensus* 4/3 (July 1978) 15–24, and “The New Testament Concept of the Word: Functions of the Word,” 5/1 (January 1979) 15–22, and the sections on doctrine in ELCIC and ELCA Constitutions. The subcommittee in the CNLC which worked on Chapter 2 of the ELCA Constitution took into consideration what Canadian colleagues had drafted.
- ⁴ E.g., William Lazareth, “Evangelical Episcopate,” *Lutheran Forum* 22 (November 1988) 13–17, and in remarks to the ELCA Task Force in connection with a later version of that paper; see his forthcoming book, *The Ministry of God’s Word: The Augsburg Confession for Today’s Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991).
- ⁵ So, e.g., Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “The Sacred Ministry and Holy Ordination in the Symbolical Books of the Lutheran Church,” in *Eucharist and Ministry*, Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue, 4 (1970) 108–109, “There is basically only one holy order. That is the presbyterate-episcopate of the New Testament.” In *Called and Ordained: Lutheran Perspectives on the Office of the Ministry*, ed. Todd Nichol and Marc Kolden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), cf. Robert Kolb, “Ministry in Martin Luther and the Lutheran Confessions,” 49–66, and Gerhard O. Forde, “The Ordained Ministry,” 117–136, especially 122–136; note the repeated reference to “the public office of the ministry of the Word.”
- ⁶ Marc Kolden, “Ministry and Vocation for Clergy and Laity,” in *Called and Ordained*, 195–207, summary on 218.
- ⁷ [ELCA] *Study of Ministry Report* 5 (September 1990) 1, interview with [Task Force Study Director] Paul Nelson, in light of presentation by Bishop Lazareth (cf. note 4 above).
- ⁸ The Response of the ELCIC to *BEM* is conveniently reprinted in *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” text*, Vol. II, ed. M. Thurian (Faith and Order Paper 132; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986) 102–104.